

OPINION AND COMMENTARY

American overkill? No, underkill

By W. Scott Thompson

Nuclear war is too important a subject to be left to the field of emotion. If we are to judge the discussion by who is best at hand-wringing on the horrors of nuclear war, then we are apt to miss the point as to how it could occur *in practice* — or how its threat will be used to elicit compliant behavior by one or the other power — as has happened many times in the past.

Unfortunately, many popular discussions of nuclear war start with the nonsubject of "overkill" and never get beyond it. "What difference does it make whether the Soviet Union has six times the nuclear megatonnage that we have, if we can kill every Russian 10 times over?" it is asked. Or perhaps "20 times" is said, or a "100 times," depending on one's assumptions.

The problem is that none of those assumptions bear any relation to reality. The United States, under suffering an attack on its nuclear forces, would not be in a position to kill every Russian or most Russians; more probably the percentage killed would be small and include few, if any, of their leadership. Any such war would be a horrible tragedy, but it is the more likely to happen if we permit comparative breastbeating about it to obscure what can be done to make such an eventuality less likely.

Every major country in the world no doubt has enough bullets to kill every member of any other adversary nation many times over. But 50 million Frenchmen will not line up to be shot 10 times apiece by well-supplied Bel-

gian police, who assuredly have the capability if gunpowder stores are the only measurement.

But leaving overkill, as popularly understood, as an absurd and unworthy metaphor, we go on to find out that the American nuclear arsenal in fact has too few warheads to attack and destroy the important available Soviet military targets with confidence, much less the far better dispersed Soviet cities. In other words, in the American arsenal there might in the *abstract* be enough TNT equivalent, if spread around into billions of shotgun shells, to kill every Russian. But the Air Force's fissionable material happens to be concentrated instead in a relatively small number of warheads, which are aimed at high-value military targets.

So, if anything, there is American underkill. Worse: we can't even usefully take aim at their most threatening military targets, the big missile silos, so well hardened are they. Alas, the reverse is not true. Our less hardened, much smaller silos are vulnerable now to the larger Soviet missiles.

Of course I speak within the framework and context of those like myself who assume that the US will never initiate an intercontinental nuclear war. Two-thirds of our arsenal, after all, is capable only of a "second strike" — that is, of a retaliatory strike — and is unsuitable for a surprise first strike against military targets. And the other third can no longer be used against the hardened Soviet missile silos. The Soviets are in the reverse situation: two-thirds of their

capability is configured for a first strike and *can* destroy our military targets. Who indeed is threatening whom?

Nuclear weapons can be used to compel an adversary short of nuclear war. Back when the US had clear superiority, President Kennedy had no hesitation in using this power as the backdrop for convincing the Soviets to withdraw their offensive and destabilizing missiles from Cuba. Our threat was credible. There was little danger of war because the Soviets knew that our superiority made their withdrawal necessary.

For the past decade the Soviets have been building toward a decisive superiority. Only the urgent moves of the new administration to resurrect America's defenses (plus perhaps the strife in Poland, with its diversionary effects) have mitigated the movement toward such Soviet superiority.

So the danger of war, or even of nuclear blackmail, that exists is not from some abstract calculation of overkill but from tangible Soviet missiles configured for a first strike, and the highly unstable situation they create: one in which Moscow might consider that it could *enhance* its superiority through a surprise strike against our missiles. This is something which many experts deem highly feasible, and which would inflict *relatively* few casualties (perhaps several million) on our civilian population.

There is no symmetrical American threat to the Soviet Union. The Soviets realize that, by the very logic of the deterrence theory in which we profess to believe, we would be de-

terred from retaliating against their surprise first strike. For by destroying our land-based missiles, they would have widened their margin of superiority.

We would be able to hit back with our relatively smaller and less accurate submarine-based missiles, which can be used only against "soft" targets like cities. But if we did that, when they had "only" hit our missiles, they know that we know that they could then utterly wipe out our cities and our land. They would after all have killed "only" 1-5 percent of Americans — horrible but far less horrible than killing 50 percent or so. We could at best in our retaliatory strike kill 20 million Russians, I believe, less than they lost in World War II. This would be thanks in part to their civil defense program. They know and we know that they could kill upwards of 100 million of us in a third strike. *That asymmetry is the chief threat to peace.*

It is of the utmost urgency that we continue the national program to remedy this vulnerability and stop the polemics about who is most against nuclear war. Losing several million Americans would be a horrible tragedy. But to repeat: it would be nowhere nearly so great a tragedy as losing 100 million or so. Let us make *both* impossible by building a strong defense.

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